Online Grapevine

Multimedia blossoms on the Web, and Internet price wars make access cheaper by the minute.

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May has arrived, bringing with it longer days and the first hints of summer. The foliage beckons, inviting me to play hooky from the items on my agenda, curl up under a shady tree, and lollygag.

May's also brought with it a vast assortment of Internet multimedia tools and new sites and sounds to enjoy.

ON THE NET

Multimedia plug-ins for Netscape Navigator are a dime a dozen or cheaper—many viewers are free for the download, though you'll need to pay for tools to create output in most of these formats. With these plug-ins and helper applications in place, a growing number of Web pages will serve up graphics, animation, sounds, and other good stuff not possible with plain old HTML.

A price war among national ISPs will benefit consumer pocketbooks, but may put Mom-and-Pop providers out of business.

If you want to check out the fuss about Virtual Reality Modeling Language (VRML), for example, you have an huge array of viewer choices: VR Scout, featured in this month's "Shareware Shop" (**http://www.chaco.com**); Vrealm (**http://www.ids-net.com**); WebFX (**http://www.paperinc.com/**); and WIRL (**http://www.vream.com**). Each virtual reality viewer lets you maneuver through 3-D scenes, and each claims to offer more features than the last.

Once you have a viewer installed, you can get a taste of what VRML is all about: Check out Squirrel Virtual Reality at **http://www.squirrel.com.au/virtualreality/** for some nifty VRML worlds to explore. The VRML Review at **http://www.imaginative.com/Chuck/vrml/** offers reviews of VRML software and pointers to more VRML worlds. VRML has promise, but so far I've seen very few sites that let you do much other than fly around looking at pretty pictures.

By contrast, no Internaut with a sound card can do without RealAudio (**http://www.realaudio.com**), which delivers decent-quality sound with no perceptible download time. The first audio-streaming Internet application, RealAudio is heavily supported on the Web.

Not only is it worth downloading RealAudio just to hear National Public Radio shows whenever you want them (**http://www.npr.org**), but PBS is online, too. You can have a flashback to your childhood (or your child's childhood) with sound clips from "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood." After you've had your fill of public broadcasting, tune in to the Internet Jukebox, which lets you listen to entire albums while you surf the Net (**http://cdnow.com/jukebox/**).

Of course, RealAudio isn't the only choice for your multimedia jones—there's also ToolVox, a rival audio-streamer whose backers claim it's three times faster than RealAudio (**http://www.voxware.com/**). If you want sound and vision, check out StreamWorks (**http://www.streamworks.com/**), VDOLive (**http://www.vdolive.com/**), or PreVU (**http://www.intervu.com/**) for MPEG video playback. Each site contains links to several other venues with content to hear and/or see.

Unfortunately, these programs are not cross-compatible—if you've downloaded and installed StreamWorks, for instance, you can view video clips from StreamWorks sites, but not from VDOLive pages. Until a multimedia-tool shakeout takes place, multimedia mavens may be spending most of their time downloading new plug-ins, rather than using them.

AMERICA ONLINE

The folks at Netscape Communications Corp. have been talking with the folks at America Online—about what? Despite wild early rumors, it's doubtful that AOL and Netscape will merge. Far more likely, AOL will license Netscape Navigator, to the cheers of AOL users everywhere.

AOL's current Windows browser isn't all bad—it's fast and well-integrated with the America Online software—but its Mac browser is in sad shape and painfully buggy. In addition to a proven track record, Navigator's support for sundries like frames and plug-ins could do America Online users a world of good.

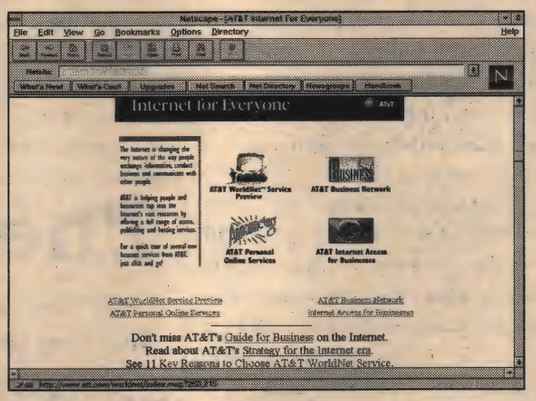
AT&T

With ticker-tape fanfare, AT&T unleashed its new, take-no-prisoners Internet-access strategy, open for business March 14, 1996. The WorldNet service undercuts most existing Internet-service-provider (ISP) competition by offering AT&T long-distance customers free access for one year. Customers will get up to five hours each month, with additional hours costing $2.50 each, or pay a flat fee of $19.95 per month for unlimited access.

Subscribers get a free AT&T-brand version of Netscape Navigator, but you can use any browser you like. Stop by **www.att.com/worldnet** for more details.

In addition to offering Internet access at killer prices, AT&T asks us to bid its ImagiNation Network good-bye and say hello to Cyber Park. The former, an online service dedicated to gamers, is being phased out in favor of a virtual-reality park accessible by the World Wide Web, other online services, and (where have we heard this before?) interactive cable TV.

CyberPark will feature a three-dimensional environment complete with high-resolution animation and sound. It's due to debut this summer, with pricing approximately the same as the ImagiNation Network's: $9.95 per month for five hours' play, with additional time at $2.95 an hour.


Internet for Everyone
Don't miss AT&T's Guide for Business on the Internet.
Read about AT&T's Strategy for the Internet era.
See 11 Key Reasons to Choose AT&T WorldNet Service.

Stop by AT&T's WorldNet site to get the lowdown on its rock-bottom pricing scheme for Internet access.

COMPUSERVE

Also jumping on the national ISP bandwagon, Spry—a.k.a. CompuServe's Internet division—is launching SpryNet, promising Internet access via a local call from more than 90 percent of the United States. Access rates for heavy users rival AT&T's—$19.95 per month for unlimited access, or $4.95 for three hours or $9.95 for seven hours with additional time at $1.95 per hour.

Feeling a bit of deja vu? Only a few months ago, America Online did essentially the same thing—CompuServe's new Internet-access service bears a striking resem-

blance to AOL's Internet-only GNN, SpryNet's pricing, however, aggressively undercuts GNN's.

GENIE

GEnie doesn't make news often, which is part of the reason that General Electric recently sold its little online service to a New York company, Yovelle Renaissance Corp. GEnie, which was down to about 55,000 subscribers when it was put on the block, will be reborn as a World Wide Web-based service.

Not many people saw any magic in GEnie, although it was well-regarded in small circles for having unique online games. The new owners will continue to focus on games, as well as other types of new content.

When the restructured GEnie hits the Web—don't hold your breath; no date has been set—let's hope its interface is something like Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link (WELL) Engaged, the new Web interface for the WELL (**http://engaged.well.com**). The WELL has been a pillar of the cyberspace community for years, but, like GEnie, its ugly old text interface and funky navigational commands frightened away more than a few visitors. With WELL Engaged, members can avoid the command-line conundrum and take a hyperlinked tour the Web way. Take the hint, GEnie.

PRODIGY

IBM and Sears proudly launched Prodigy in 1984, and today at least one of the partners—Sears—is eager to unload it. At this writing, however, the department-store giant hasn't found a taker for its estimated $1 billion share of the online service.

However, Prodigy is not sitting idle while waiting for a bidder. It, too, has launched an Internet-access service or at least trials of one in the New York metropolitan area. The buck-an-hour service, currently with no monthly minimum fee, is targeted at new Internet users. It includes an e-mail address and Netscape Navigator along with clients for FTP, Telnet, and Internet Relay Chat. Users will be able to download and install any Internet software they prefer if Prodigy's choices don't suit them. National availability of the offering is expected by summer.

Prodigy's announced pricing beats out GNN's $14.95 monthly tab for 20 hours; additional hours on GNN are $1.95 each. Heavy users may skip straight to SpryNet or WorldNet. I wouldn't be surprised to see a price war raging among these four ISPs, not to mention the likes of Netcom and PSINet, by summer—a battle that should benefit end users such as us, but may put mom-and-pop ISPs out of business forever. ▼

Shopper Online

BY HANNAH KINNERSLEY
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You know about ISDN, but are you ready for ADSL? This month, *Computer Shopper* Online takes a look at the issues surrounding asymmetrical digital subscriber lines—alternatives to T1 lines or cable modems that could form a new high-speed way to connect to the Internet.

ADSL modem technology compares favorably to ISDN for speed, but doesn't require the revamping of the entire phone system: Rather than using a separate digital network or extending fiber-optic cable to what phone companies call "the last mile" or the curb outside your business or home, ADSL involves an upgrade of the existing neighborhood network or switch center connected to your site via existing phone lines.

The use of digital signal processing and compression algorithms permit huge amounts of data to travel over twisted copper lines—using new ADSL modems, it's theoretically possible to transmit up to 64Kbps in two-way data transfer and more than 6Mbps in a single direction. That means ASDL could enable data-intensive applications like 30fps video conferencing in cable and ISDN modems' stead.

Will this invention delay the conversion of existing communications networks from analog to digital, or is it a stopgap measure to give phone companies time to go the last mile? Read *Computer Shopper* contributing editor David Aubrey's article on ADSL (p. 554) and hear what the experts have to say about the technology in this month's event in the Executives Online forum on ZD Net/CompuServe (**GO ZNT:EXEC**).

Finding Us Online

Computer Shopper Online has sites on the World Wide Web, ZD Net/CompuServe Edition, Microsoft Network, and AT&T Interchange. On each of these platforms you can learn about the latest products and technologies, download *Computer Shopper* utilities, or discuss computers with fellow consumers. In addition, you can read hypertext versions of your favorite *Computer Shopper* articles and access biweekly columns not found in the magazine. BBS and User Group listings are available only from our online forums. Once you log on, it's easy to find us. Just follow these directions:

World Wide Web: To experience the Web Edition live, you need an Internet connection plus a World Wide Web browser such as Netscape Navigator. Once connected, just go to **http://www.cshopper.com.**

ZD Net/CompuServe Edition: If you already are a ZD Net/CompuServe member or are a CompuServe member and want to join, type **GO CSHOPPER.** Otherwise, call 800-895-4596 to sign up and receive *Computer Shopper*'s online introductory offer. Ask for the CSZ promotion, and you will get the ZD Net version of WinCim or MacCim, one free month of both CompuServe and ZD Net, a $15 usage credit, and three hours of Internet access.

Microsoft Network: If you are a member of MSN, access **ComputerShopper** from the main screen. (Choose Go To from the Edit pull-down menu.) You can also get to us by clicking on Categories/Computers, Software/Computer News, and Publications/Computer Shopper. To join MSN, you must have Windows 95.

COMPUTER SHOPPER ONLINE

ZD Net Dispatch

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Learning a new computer language requires a serious time commitment, and programmers used to be faced with a choice between learning from books (with no guide or teacher to help), or investing hours and money in programming classes. Now ZD Net on CompuServe is offering a third alternative: an online university where students can download course materials, participate in tutorials, and ask questions of instructors, while working from their own computers on the job or at home.

The university (**GO ZNT:ZDU**) is open to all ZD Net/CompuServe Edition members, although it has proven so popular that there are waiting lists for classes. All classes are free, except for connect charges for the time you spend online learning or downloading course materials.

Current classes include Webscaping: Learn How to Code in HTML; C++ From Scratch; Introduction to Liberty Basic—Windows Programming for the Masses; and Using Objects in Visual Basic 4.0. Classes are taught over a period of five to 10 weeks, with suggested study time on each topic at least an hour a day. Different classes are suited for different levels—Webscaping and C++ From Scratch are aimed at beginners, while Using Objects in Visual Basic 4.0 is designed for intermediate programmers with previous Visual Basic experience.

In addition to the online university, members of ZD Net/CompuServe Edition have access to all the Ziff-Davis magazines online, including *Computer Shopper.* Here, in addition to reading articles and reviews from the paper publication, you can participate in forums where ZD editors and writers answer questions and offer advice on computing issues. So whether you're enrolled in ZDU or just hanging out on campus, ZD Net is an educational experience. ▼